

Adam Daniels, *Minnesota Daily*

For more than 20 years, Pat Redig has watched in wonderment as thousands of rehabilitated raptors have been released back into the wild at the Spring Raptor Release.

"It never, ever gets old," said Redig, founder of the Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine. "It started as a little kernel, and I'm always touched to see people show so much interest."

The Raptor Center released four birds in front of about 3,000 people Saturday at the Hyland Lake Park Reserve Visitor Center in Bloomington, Minn.

The majority of birds the center treats have been injured through some kind of interaction with humans, including being hit by a car, flying into windows, being shot and getting electrocuted by power lines.

Executive director of the Raptor Center and assistant clinical professor Julia Ponder said the raptors must have no medical problems and must be able to fly well before they are released.

"They have to be back at 100 percent," she said.

Members of the Raptor Center, corporate sponsor Delta Airlines and U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., helped release a Cooper's hawk, an American kestrel and two Red-tailed hawks.

McCollum released a Red-tailed hawk and has a record of championing environmental preservation and protection.

"This is a fantastic opportunity for Minnesotans to get involved and learn more about these beautiful birds," McCollum said.

For each bird, the crowd counted down from three and then the bird was thrust up in the air and flew away quickly.

The crowd was mostly made up of families who had the opportunity to learn from members of Three Rivers Park District and the Raptor Center. More than five booths allowed visitors to touch feathers, play games and purchase merchandise.

Founded in 1974, the Raptor Center treats about 800 birds a year and trains students from all over the world in avian medicine and surgery. The center is at the forefront of emerging raptor health and populations issues, and more than 250,000 participate in public education programs and events each year.

Complications don't stop after the birds are rehabilitated. Spring has the potential for territorial battles between birds, so the center did nest surveys before the event to make sure there were no nesting birds of the same species in the area of the release.

"It was some of the center's interns' graduation day today," Redig said, "It's an extra-emotional day, but it's a day full of accomplishment."